

Caregiving from a Distance

Being a caregiver is a difficult task, but being a caregiver and being hundreds to thousands of miles away makes this difficult task even more complicated. In today's world, technology and easier transportation methods make it common for family members to live in different cities and states. Many adult children must help from a distance when their older parents and other relatives need assistance.

Adult caregivers who support their loved ones from a distance are not only at a distance from their loved one, but also from local phone books and agencies that help older adults. This can easily lead to feelings of frustration and helplessness when trying to access needed services from so far away.

There are a number of steps that can be taken to make the task more manageable:

- **Gather information.** Have a conversation with loved ones about what is needed and look for community services. There is information available over the phone and on the Internet. Also identify neighbors, family, friends, clergy and others who might help. Do not only go by what the aging relatives say on the phone. Eyes and ears of others are needed to make sure what the loved one is saying appears to be true. When visiting your loved one, make certain to become acquainted with the people around them and keep a list of phone numbers and addresses. If the loved one cannot be reached, calling these people can be critical. They may also be able to help with some immediate or important needs.
- **Be prepared.** Before a crisis occurs, collect the necessary medical, financial and legal information. Know the names of doctors including specialists. Write down types and dosage of all prescription and over the counter medications, including eye drops. Make note of insurance information for both primary and secondary policies including the carrier (e.g. Medicare, Medicaid, AARP, BCBS) the group number, the policy number and the name to which the policy is assigned. Become familiar with the loved one's assets and typical household and personal expenses per month. Be certain you have the Social Security numbers of your loved one. Also, talk with your loved one about a Durable Power of Attorney (DPOA) and make certain that psychiatric treatment is specifically included in the medical care portion. Understand what a DPOA entitles the advocate to do and what cannot be done. Make certain that the DPOA is in compliance with the laws of the state in which the individual resides. If necessary, consult a professional about setting up Guardianship. This will be helpful when the loved one can no longer make informed decisions for themselves by insuring that there is someone who will have a say in what is going on with their care and that there are no unnecessary delays in service delivery. Once this is completed, make sure the doctors and local hospitals have a copy of this form. Another important resource is a Personal Emergency Response System in case the loved one has a fall and cannot get to the telephone. It is also a good suggestion for the long distance caregiver to keep a copy of a local phone book on hand.

- **Assess the situation.** When visiting the loved one, be observant. Look for health or safety issues. Professional consultants, such as geriatric care managers are available to help families decide when an older adult needs assistance. It is best to involve the individual in the assessment of their needs since this will be affecting their daily schedules. One way to increase involvement is to explain what the services are and how the services will help them maintain their independence.

- **Make a schedule.** Have a set time every week to call. Not only is it good for elderly family members, especially those with Dementia, to get into a routine but this is also a good way to check for safety if the individual does not answer the phone. In addition, it is important to make a surprise call every now and then.

- **Take care of yourself.** It is impossible to be everything to everyone and to be everywhere all of the time. Ask for help from other family members or professionals when needed. Finally, acknowledge that what is being done is the best that can be done. Rely upon the resources that are set up for assistance.

For more information on this topic please go to Caring from a Distance, a Web site “dedicated to serving the needs of long distance caregivers” at <http://www.cfad.org/> or contact The Eldercare Locator toll free at 800-677-1116, which can provide a list of local services in the area.

Written by: Veronica Thelen, L.L.M.F.T.

Reference:

Thelen, V. (January 2008). Caring from a distance. *Mental Health Matters*. 5(3). Gratiot Medical Center: An Affiliate of MidMichigan Health.